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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: MOROCCAN POLITICAL PARTIES KICK
OFF CONSULTATIONS, WITH THE ISLAMISTS LEADING THE WAY

REF: RABAT 431 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/C Tim Lenderking for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: On March 10-11, the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD), teaming up with the smaller Forces Citoyennes party (FC), held a conference at the Tour Hassan Hotel in Rabat entitled "Regionalization and Autonomy: Models and Options." International experts from Canada, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Germany participated and described efforts to promote regionalization in their countries. The conference was covered by Moroccan television and al-Jazeera, among others. The audience was drawn mostly from Moroccan political parties, though key players USFP and Istiqlal were not present, and academics, including professors from universities in the Rabat area. Among diplomats, the Brazilian ambassador and representatives from the Canadian, French, Polish, and Italian embassies attended.

¶2. (C) Summary and Comment (cont'd): While this event is the most visible effort to date by political parties to answer the King's late 2005 public call to propose ideas for autonomy in the Western Sahara, it did not serve as a forum for a debate on autonomy in the territory. The foreign experts had little background in the Western Sahara issue and thus made few correlations between their experience and the Western Sahara context; as we understand it, that is something the PJD and other parties will do behind closed doors as they develop their plans for submission to the Palace at the end of March (and we understand further that the Palace has requested that the parties not make their plans public in advance). During the brief periods slated for debate at the conference, questions and comments tended to focus on the foreign models rather than areas of applicability to the Western Sahara. Subbing at the last minute for Ahmed Lahlimi, the High Commissioner of Planning, who reportedly took ill, was the former Mayor of Meknes and ex-Minister of Health Taieb Bensheikh, who presented the Moroccan perspective. Either way the choice of Moroccan presenter was odd, given that neither of the individuals are known for their expertise on either regionalization or the Western Sahara. The few Sahrawis in the audience -- PJD members from the Western Sahara, PJD officials told us -- were conspicuously quiet throughout the two-day conference. Whatever the shortcomings of the conference, though, it once

again demonstrated the Islamist party's prowess at being first off the mark in shaping an issue of paramount importance to Morocco -- leaving the rest of the field to play catch up. End Summary and Comment.

Consultations Underway

¶3. (C) Answering the King's late 2005 call, the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) teamed up with the smaller Forces Citoyennes party to organize what is thus far the most visible and public "consultation" to promote an autonomy plan for the Western Sahara. Experts who presented papers on autonomy were: Roger Ouellette, Political Science professor at the University of Moncton, Canada; Michel Peraldi, Director of the Jacques Berque Center; Walter Vandenbossche, Lawyer and Deputy from Brussels; Riccardo Smimmo, First Secretary at the Italian Embassy in Rabat; Joan Vitro, constitutional law professor at the University of Barcelona; and Abdejabbar Arrach, Law professor at Hassan II University in Settat, who spoke about regionalization in Germany (based on years of residence and study there).

The PJD Opens

¶4. (C) Following a brief opening by PJD general secretariat member Lahcen Daoudi, PJD Secretary General Saad Eddin Othmani outlined his party's approach to the question of autonomy, centering it on the following five points. First, Othmani said that autonomy must be a voluntary choice, without pressure from the outside. Second, he emphasized the need for Morocco's regions to be reconfigured and based on criteria that take into account the economic development of

the regions. Third, he stressed regional governments and regional parliaments should exist in Morocco's local governance structure. He added that these institutions should be run by people who have been elected freely and democratically, not appointed. Fourth, Othmani highlighted that the southern provinces should be granted more specificity than other regions with respect to their autonomy because of their "political situation." Lastly, Othmani underscored that there must be frank debate, national consensus, and transparency on this issue in order for an autonomy plan to be credible in the eyes of the Moroccan population.

Lahjouji's Comments

¶5. (C) After Othmani's opening remarks, Abderrahim Lahjouji, President of the Forces Citoyennes party (FC), delivered brief comments on regionalization and autonomy. (Comment: FC has no seats in the Moroccan parliament. Its founders, like Lahjouji, are mostly businessmen. The two parties signed an alliance two years ago and have co-sponsored a number of events, including a conference on US-Morocco Free Trade Agreement in 2005). Focusing on the prevalence of globalization in the international community, Lahjouji commented that despite the many positives that globalization can bring to the table, there are very important cultural implications to consider. Lahjouji noted that one important negative aspect is that globalization has a tendency to standardize the ways of life for different populations, alluding to the unique cultural heritage of Sahrawis in the Western Sahara. It is in this light, he explained, that regionalization can play an important role for Morocco. Regionalization, he offered, provides an outlet for populations, i.e. the Western Sahara, to resist change that results from globalization, and can also produce a democracy that is more decentralized and more representative. He emphasized, without directly referencing the Western Sahara, that preserving regional autonomy with a responsible elected officials will assure socioeconomic and cultural development. However, he laid out very clearly that certain responsibilities, including territorial integrity, national defense, and monetary unity should remain in the hands of the

central government. Lahjouji closed by saying that he hoped the conference, through debate and learning from other country's experiences, would help make Morocco "more democratic, more modern, and more developed."

The Moroccan Perspective

¶6. (C) Taieb Bensheikh, the former mayor of Meknes and ex-Minister of Health, presented his thoughts on Morocco's experience with decentralization following the country experts. While his presentation largely focused on how decentralization can promote regional economic development and the key role the economic sectors can play in this process, Bensheikh also stressed the importance of local governments being granted more responsibility in order to manage local affairs more effectively. Bensheikh added that economic, social, and cultural development are dependent on the existence of healthy political institutions, a parliament that represents the popular will, and local communes that are a result of free and fair elections. He explained that it is time for the Kingdom to undertake constitutional reforms to increase the powers of the government and the Prime Minister, which will also reinforce the role of the Ministry of Justice and ensure its independence and impartiality. Bensheikh added that in his view, the inhabitants of the "southern provinces" will not accept any alternative but to preserve the territorial integrity of the Kingdom.

Views from Decentralization Experts

¶7. (SBU) Poloffs compared notes March 13 with decentralization and communications experts at the USAID-funded SUNY parliamentary program, who also attended the conference. Julia Demichelis, Chief of Party for the State University of New York Center for International

Development's (SUNY/CID) Parliament Support Project, explained that, in her view, political parties, including the PJD and FC, are capitalizing on the current debate regarding the future of the Western Sahara to promote their own ideas on regionalization and decentralization for all of Morocco, not just the Western Sahara. While presenters provided good fodder for discussion on various institutional and legal options for decentralization, Demichelis noted that they did not take the lessons learned from their respective cases and relate them to the Moroccan experience, let alone to the particulars of the Western Sahara. The conference was a good start towards a meaningful dialogue, but lacked synthesis, she added. Ahmed Jazouli, Communication specialist for SUNY/CID and former spokesperson for Morocco's fourth largest political party, commented that the PJD's "real work" on its autonomy plan will start after the conference, drawing main ideas and key lessons from each presenter. While there were some parallels drawn between the Spanish experience with the Basque region and Morocco's experience with the Western Sahara, Jazouli noted that the Spanish model can not be directly applied to Morocco.

Press Reaction

¶8. (SBU) As of March 14, the conference had triggered little reaction or debate in the Moroccan press beyond factual reporting. Moroccan TV carried the event on the news the evening of March 11. One interesting comment appeared in the PJD-affiliated Arabic-language daily Attajdid on March 14, quoting Mostafa Barrazani, a former Polisario official who attended the conference. Barrazani contended that no matter how "generous" Morocco's autonomy plan is or what it includes, the Polisario and Algeria will immediately and categorically reject it. He argued that it is in Morocco's interest to implement the autonomy plan unilaterally if necessary, without negotiations with the Polisario or Algeria. This would allow Moroccans to see in practice the advantages and disadvantages of the autonomy solution. This would be a "good experiment," he concluded.

Activities of Other Parties

19. (SBU) Meanwhile, as Istiqlal Secretary General Abbas el Fassi prepares to visit the US at the end of March and as his party prepares a road show around Morocco to discuss autonomy, the USFP announced that it held an internal meeting on March 7 to review the party's vision for autonomy. Finance Minister and USFP heavyweight Fathallah Oulalou reportedly debriefed party officials on his meeting with Palace Advisor Mohamed Motassim in early March to discuss the King's expectations of the political parties.

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